

Web edition

The Public's Health

Q: What does Slin a Slainte mean and how can it make me healthier?

A: See below.

Q: What is West Nile Virus and why do I need to know about it?

A: See inside.



An Ounce of Prevention

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Vice Chair, The Prevention Coalition

Simplified to the bare essentials, this path to wellness is every bit as inviting as a walk in the park.

The health of this nation's citizens can be significantly improved through actions individuals take themselves. This is the message Dr. Patricia Nolan, Rhode Island's Director of Health, brought to a meeting of health care providers, health insurers, and health advocacy organizations more than 4 years ago. "Behavior-oriented prevention is the challenge, and the opportunity before us in the 21st century," she told them. "I invite you to join with me in a public-private partnership to accept that challenge, to make that opportunity real for the people of our state."

At that moment the Rhode Island Prevention Coalition was born.

The Coalition is an association of public and private organizations whose purpose is to improve the health status of Rhode Islanders through prevention and health promotion. The Rhode Island Public Health Foundation serves as fiscal agent and provides administrative support to volunteers. The premise of the Coalition is that together we can all accomplish what we could not do alone because of resource or financial limitations. While the public health is often viewed as something that is the responsibility of the government, the reality is that we often cannot reach people without the help of private agencies such as health care providers, health insurers, voluntary health agencies, and the business community. On the other hand, these private agencies are committed to the prevention of disease, but often are without the resources to really make a difference in the population. Thus, together we can truly make a difference and address pressing public health needs of the people of our state.

The Coalition's goal is straightforward: a healthier population through the promotion of affirmative lifestyle habits. Positive lifestyle choices offer a wide range of outcomes: for individuals, healthier and longer lives and an improved outlook on life; for the Rhode Island health system, savings in health care costs; for Rhode Island employers, improved workforce productivity. The Coalition has raised over \$600,000 in public and private funds to put this faith into practice.

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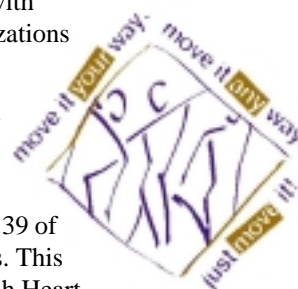
The "Move It" Campaign

Rhode Islanders sit too much for their own good: 55 percent do not exercise regularly, and 30 percent get no exercise at all. Yet even moderate exercise, taken regularly, can have important health benefits. This is an immense public health challenge. In response to this challenge the Coalition has launched the "Move It, Rhode Island" initiative, making grants totaling \$333,000 to 22 community organizations, for a range of services covering the entire state. For example:

- Five communities, from Woonsocket to Newport, are developing walking paths or fitness trails to encourage people of all ages and physical capability to exercise regularly.
- The University of Rhode Island developed a series of exercise videos for the elderly that have been aired statewide on cable television channels.
- The Coventry High School paired learning disabled and non-disabled students as hiking partners.
- Mount Pleasant High School in Providence opened its sports and fitness resources to the local community in the evening.
- The Center for Hispanic Policy and Advocacy initiated a statewide Spanish-language fitness education program, and mobilized community support for developing soccer practice fields in a Providence park.
- Several YMCA's came together to develop walking groups by working with numerous community organizations and clubs

The "Path to Health" Project

The Coalition's most recent initiative looks to establish walking and fitness paths in all 39 of Rhode Island's cities and towns. This approach is modeled on the Irish Heart



Foundation's *Sli na Slainte* (Path to Health) program, which has been adopted in ten other countries. This initiative, brought to the U.S. by the RI Prevention Coalition, has been franchised nationally by the American Heart Association, which views Rhode Island as a pilot project for eventual replication nationwide.

The program does not require new concrete or walking trails. Rather, attractive signs indicating achievable distances to walk are placed at ½ mile intervals with directional arrows and map signs at appropriate points in between. There is no starting or end point. One can enter the path at any point and start counting off the miles. A key concept is to place the paths where people are, as opposed to remote isolated areas. Therefore paths are installed in downtown areas, often traversing attractive, historic

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districts, and bringing people past community centers where businesses thrive, interlacing residential areas, parks, senior housing, and schools. The intent is to entice members of the public to walk alone or with friends for leisure, fun, and good health. The only exercise equipment needed is a pair of comfortable shoes.

Providence inaugurated Path to Health in the U.S. with two paths. The first is a central six mile route downtown route encompassing the State Capital, Providence Place, and the Fleet Skating Center. The second is a three mile route in the historic Broadway/Armory District featuring extraordinary houses and the Cranston St. Armory. Lifespan sponsored the two Providence Paths. A scenic woodland path in Colt State Park, Bristol will open in the next few months. A path in Pawtucket, sponsored by Memorial Hospital of Rhode Island, is expected to open in the late spring. Following that, Narragansett (sponsor: Washington Trust Company), and Middletown will open paths. There are four communities where the early planning process is now underway.

The paths are promoted through a variety of initiatives, including promotion at worksites and through special community events. Additionally, a media campaign is being developed by Edward Carfano, award winning film director, and the Boston University School of Public Health. The media campaign will involve public service announcements (television and radio) combined with print media campaigns. While the program is in its infancy, the RI program is the first to collect systematic process, qualitative and quantitative data to evaluate the efficacy of this "environmental change" to promote health.



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 Roger Williams Medical Center
 RI Public Health Association



Worksite Wellness: in bloom!

Throughout the state, and within HEALTH itself, a robust practice of good health behaviors in the workplace is increasingly in evidence.

Corporate America is tuning in to the many benefits of keeping its work force healthy. HEALTH promotes Worksite Wellness in two ways. First, as a member of the Worksite Wellness Councils of America (WELCOA), it is the founding member of the Worksite Wellness Council of Rhode Island (WWCRI). Second, it maintains its own Worksite Wellness initiatives.

Worksite Wellness Council of Rhode Island

In 1982, a group of employees in Omaha joined together to form the nation's first Wellness Council. Its mission was, and is, to enhance the health and well-being of employees, to improve productivity, reduce absenteeism, and contain escalating health care costs. The Omaha Council's success spurred cost-conscious employers in other communities to form their own Wellness Councils under the WELCOA umbrella. Through HEALTH's initiative, in 1999 Rhode Island joined the Wellness Councils of America under the WWCRI banner.



Speaker Dr. Louis Sullivan, President of the Morehouse School of Medicine, greets guests at the WWCRI annual breakfast January 18. Head table (l to r): Peter Fornal, WWCRI President; Dr. Patricia Nolan, Director of HEALTH; William McGowan, Business Manager, International Brotherhood Board of Electricians; Charles Fogarty, Lieutenant Governor; Todd Cipriani, WWCRI Membership Committee Chair

WELCOA maintains a nationwide network of locally affiliated Wellness Councils serving thousands of corporate member companies and their employees. It offers direct membership opportunities for organizations not served geographically by a local affiliate. WELCOA promotes its credo that "Corporate wellness makes a bottom-line impact." Today, more than 81 per cent of America's businesses with 50 or more employees have some form of health promotion program. The most popular activities include exercise, stop-smoking classes, back care programs, and stress management. WELCOA's combined workforce totals over 2 million Americans. Membership is open to any company anywhere, including Canada and abroad. At a turbulent time for health care in the United States, WELCOA demonstrates that worksite wellness is health care reform that **works**.

HEALTH has awarded the WWCRI a \$50,000 grant to promote smoking cessation and collect data on environmental tobacco smoke (ETS) in the work place. The Council is working with the American Lung Association, RI Chapter, to spread the word about the perils of secondhand smoke and to help in the elimination of smoking in the work place. Through this affiliation, the Lung Association will refer to the Council names of companies and individuals seeking information, strategies, and techniques in worksite tobacco control.

In April, the Council participated in the Providence Chamber of Commerce Business Expo 2000 at the RI Convention Center with an information booth staffed by volunteers answering questions and distributing brochures on ETS in the work place. The Council also presented a seminar on ETS in the work place.

Making Rhode Island the first "Well State"

Rhode Island aims to become the nation's first "Well State" by December 31, 2001. To accomplish this, key companies plan to complete a WELCOA program called the "Well Workplace University." These companies include health care systems, educational institutions and municipal organizations who collectively employ 20% of the state's workforce. If successful, they will meet the requirements of WELCOA's Bronze, Silver or Gold Well Workplace Awards. The Wellness University and the WELCOA Awards set specific standards companies and organizations must meet. They must demonstrate evidence that their employees benefit in body, mind and spirit from progressive, health-conducive work environments.

The Well State initiative is a project under development. The partnership between HEALTH and WWCRI provides a strong foundation for future success.

HEALTH Worksite Wellness Initiatives

HEALTH wants to become a model for how organizations in Rhode Island, both public and private, implement Worksite Wellness. Toward this end, HEALTH Director Dr. Patricia Nolan re-structured HEALTH Worksite Wellness initiatives in 1999. She organized a combined Worksite Health Committee, chaired by HEALTH staffers Edna S. Poulin, Chief, Worksite Wellness, and Michelle Santos, Information Specialist. Committee members include professional staff from all divisions. The Committee set an aggressive agenda to make HEALTH a model not only for the state, but also for the nation. Some activities:



William Kizer, WELCOA Board member, Dr. David Hunnicut, WELCOA President, and Peter Fornal, WWCRI President



- **Facility survey of physical structures and buildings.** *HEALTH* commits to making its buildings and workspace as safe as possible. This survey includes all aspects of its physical facilities, including corridors and walkways, stairways, work stations, offices, meeting rooms, restrooms, ventilation, temperature control, air quality, parking facilities, and more.

- **Analysis of injury records.** *This comprehensive review of employee injury records will help identify high risk areas and suggest corrective measures.*



WWCRI Vice President Mark Converse chats with RI business community members about HEALTH's grant, which will create an alliance with the American Lung Association to mount a full-scale assault on environmental tobacco smoke in the work place.

- **Wellness Check 2000** is a tool to identify health risks resulting from employees' behavior and lifestyle choices. *HEALTH* makes this technology accessible to employers throughout Rhode Island as well as its own employees.

- **Other channels for employee health and wellness information and feedback.** *These include a Health and Safety Committee, the Director's quarterly meetings with all employees, "brown bag" lunches on special health topics, an Employee Handbook, a suggestion box, and the Director's lunchtime small group meetings to hear the concerns of employees.*

Readers may contact Edna S. Poulin, Chief, Worksite Wellness, at 222-5112 for further information. *The Public's Health* will provide updates of HEALTH's Worksite Wellness activities in future issues.

Health Watch : West Nile Virus

Last August a mosquito-borne virus (new to the US) sickened 60 people in New York City. Seven elderly people died. West Nile Virus (WNV), common in parts of the Middle East, western Asia and Africa, now threatens to spread to other states along the eastern seaboard. Unlike similar diseases transmitted by mosquitoes that live in swamps and rural areas, WNV favors the common, urban "house mosquito." As a result, any part of the state, urban, suburban or rural could be affected.

Fortunately, the spread of WNV can be prevented by taking a few common-sense steps before mosquito season arrives. Together with the Department of Environmental Management (DEM), the Department of Health (HEALTH) developed an action plan for Rhode Island. Here's what's involved:

Mosquito Control: Mosquitoes breed in small amounts of standing water. DEM purchased and distributed larvicide to municipalities for use in storm sewer "catch basins"—ideal mosquito breeding areas. By reducing the population of adult mosquitoes, cities and towns will help reduce the risk of human infection.

Monitoring: Early detection is key to managing the threat. HEALTH will monitor health care providers to identify any human cases. DEM will use its network of volunteers, veterinarians and Animal Control Officers to watch the wild bird population for signs of illness. Mosquitoes carry the virus from infected birds to humans. DEM will also step up its' mosquito trapping activities. The URI Center for Vector-Borne Diseases is prepared to test captured mosquitoes for WNV and other infections.

Education: People can take common sense steps to protect themselves from mosquito bites. Clearing the yard and rain gutters of debris that allows standing water to collect eliminates places for mosquitoes to breed. Repairing screens on doors and windows keeps mosquitoes outside where they belong. Finally, using insect repellent (no more than 30% DEET, the active ingredient) and wearing long tops and pants, especially at dusk and dawn, prevents mosquito bites. HEALTH and DEM will distribute information on personal protection from mosquito bites in several languages.

Implementing this plan should reduce exposure to WNV-infected mosquitoes and allow everyone in Rhode Island to enjoy a safe and healthy summer. For more information, consult the HEALTH website: www.health.state.ri.us.

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Safe and Healthy Lives

in Safe and Healthy Communities

